DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 163 114 UD 018 802

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TITLE Community Involvement in Schools: Approaches and Practices.
PUB DATE 19 May 78
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Society of Ethnic and Special Studies (5th, St. Louis, Missouri, May 18-19, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Administrator Responsibility; *Community Involvement; *Educational Change; Elementary Secondary Education; Ethnic Relations; *Minority Groups; *School Community Relationship; School Role; Self Determination; *Social Change
IDENTIFIERS Illinois

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a view of school-community relations based on the concept of change. It is held that the school should develop and maintain a close relationship with the community if it is to recognize and provide for changing educational needs. The involvement of minority groups in education, a controversial issue, is necessary in order for this responsiveness to be effected. Staff and teacher preparation, leadership support, and open communication among school personnel and community members are essential. A number of ways that concerned citizens can influence school government include participation as volunteers in school and recreational activities, membership on decision making committees, and involvement in local political issues. (GC)

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COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOLS: APPROACHES AND PRACTICES

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Society of Ethnic and Special Studies
Fifth Annual Conference
Special Emerging Programs in Higher Education
St. Louis, Missouri
May 18, 19, 1978
Sponsored by Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville

UDC 18802

NOV 1 1978

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a view of school-community relations and community involvement based on the concept of the changing school and the changing community. The modern community in this country at this particular time is in a continuous state of becoming. It is driven by the forces of social and economic change and either in some measure recognizes, adapts to, and utilizes these changes or is submerged by them. The school will in a large measure help to determine which course the community will take. An education system unaware of the elements of change among the people it should serve fails in its basic responsibility.

The role of the school in the community is vital. If the school is to recognize and provide for educational needs, it must develop and maintain a close relationship with the community. In order to develop and maintain this relationship four essential principles must be operative:

one - a recognition of the school as a public enterprise

two - that truth is the only valid and legitimate guide to action

three - that there must be a structured, systematic, and active participation on the part of the people in the community in the educational planning, policy making, problem solving, and evaluation of schools.

four - there must be a clear and effective two-way system of communication between School and Community.

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOLS: APPROACHES AND PRACTICES

The dramatic changes which have taken place in the role of the school in modern American society call for a new concept of the relation of the school to the community it serves.

The expanded role of the school is apparent in broader curricula which include driver training, space science, and electronics as well as many other subjects. Furthermore, the clientele of the school has been vastly increased by the inclusion in the public school system of nursery schools, kindergartens, community colleges, and adult education programs. Education, particularly education in the sciences, has in the past decade become a national concern with direct implications for national defense, even for national survival. Finally, the increased costs which characterize expanding educational programs serve to generate a real concern and widespread interest in the educational process and its results.

These factors have encouraged not only greater interest in the schools but also increased participation by lay people in determining the purposes of the school, developing school policies, evaluating school buildings, and engaging in general educational planning. The popularity of Citizens Advisory Committees, Citizens Educational Councils, and similar groups is ample evidence of the fact.

In view of these developments, the educational venture is no longer a "closed corporation" run by the professionals. The public is becoming increasingly aware of its stake in education and is insisting on a more complete knowledge of the enterprise which so directly affects it. This awakening of public interest and the recognition of ownership by the public can become a valuable asset to professional educators and to education itself. However, it can be of greatest value if it is understood and utilized instead of misunderstood and mistrusted by the professional administrator. The traditional Public Relations Program of the school, consisting as it does, of "telling and selling" the community on education

is outmoded. The lay people of the community are becoming interested participants in the educational enterprise and are becoming cognizant of the important role which they can and should play in modern education.

I submit that these developments call for a new and more vital concept of School-Community Relations and community involvement. I want you to consider a concept of School-Community Relations and community involvement which not only takes into account the marked changes which have asserted themselves in the community as well as in education, but actually utilizes these changes in the interest of better education. Better education, especially in communities where members of racial and ethnic minorities comprise a large percentage of the community. I am concerned about the lack of encounter of School Principals, College Presidents, Teachers, Professors, Counselors, and Advisors with members of racial and ethnic minorities on the level of equality and as participants in shaping the activities of the school. Such encounters may not produce understanding or good will, but they do have the possibility, much more than do textbooks or administrative rules, of changing attitudes, of forcing the professional to ask again: Who am I? What am I doing here? What ought I to do? How centralized or diffused? How rigid or flexible? How static or changing? How exclusive or representative? These are questions about involvement that must be answered by those who would integrate public schools. I am convinced that wherever public schools are found one finds also the practice of politics and the use of power. Wherever politics and power are used, minorities are more often than not - not adequately represented.

INVOLVING THE COMMUNITY IN THE PROCESS:

Basic to the concept of community involvement is the belief that the community should be involved in the decision making processes that affect their lives. In addition to being involved in the process of determination of how its needs are

to be met. This dual involvement is absolutely necessary in order to ensure the development of adequate services.

In earlier times, educational institutions in our society were developed by people with power. The community's ability to get their needs met depended on the way the schools chose to define its purpose and goal. An emerging attitude is developing, one which sees schools as servants of the people. The goals, procedures, and operating styles depend on client approval for justification. Basic to this conceptualization is the assumption that within every community lies the untapped resources that are needed to identify and solve its problems. Many schools have become so "large" and centralized that the people can no longer identify with them. In order to achieve the maximum return from our various educational endeavors, the process of coordination must involve citizen participation.

SHOULD THE COMMUNITY BE INVOLVED?

Until fairly recently hardly any minority community residents or community leaders openly complained about the centralization of educational decision making. They primarily concerned themselves with overcoming widespread corruption, waste and inefficiency which they attributed to neighborhood political structures. Consequently, School Boards of Education, Boards of Trustees, etc., and their administrative bureaucracies were allowed to govern on the basis of their expertise and their adherence to norms and values which were often in conflict with those of their clients. (Their clients being all members of the community--black, white, yellow, etc.)

The resulting problems were cultural incompatibility. This incompatibility intensified as new minorities began to arrive. They were met by centralized, reformed, insensitive, school boards and very "professional" superintendents, presidents, and boards of trustees.

Armed with the knowledge and the experience of the Boston, Louisville, Chicago, Little Rock Arkansas, Cairo Illinois, University of Mississippi crisis and convinced that the system built by past reformers was responsible for the tremendous gaps between the community and those who ran the school, Blacks and other minorities sparked a multi-ethnic movement that demanded community involvement and/or control and total decentralization of educational administration.

Those demands--by groups that have traditionally had little power--for enhanced roles in the shaping of policies that vitally affect their lives were widely hailed and condemned as unprecedented.

The power structure began to send smoke signals in the form of questions such as:

1. Does "Minority Community involvement" tend to be a step toward racial separation? Example:

   - home/school concept...."whites tend to hold on tighter to their home school"

   - that is not my school...."Blacks and other minorities tend to feel that my school was taken away and replaced by your school and I will not participate in anything you do."

   - the students are intruders...."students tend to isolate themselves away from the 'intruding' minority students."

   - the absurd request...."the administration and staff request that 'you let us handle the situation we are the professionals"

2. Would minority community involvement intensify social friction?

   - some of those who charge that it would have inter-racial and inter-neighborhood friction in mind, others intra-racial and intra-neighborhood

3. Would minority community involvement be inimical to educational honesty, equity, and professionalism?

   - the power elite....we do things better when they are organized says the power structure. What they mean is "we do things better when they are organized by us."

- process vs. content orientation...."minorities don't pay attention to the 'process' says the power structure"

- logic vs. emotion...."Blacks are too emotional about everything-I feel uncomfortable. But we need it now, is no reason to forget the efficient process that has been successful for years."

- legitimacy vs. efficiency

- racism; a matter of doer's and planners...."certain people can do the work but boy are they poor planners"

4. Would minority community involvement reduce the capacity of educational systems for Action?

- large numbers never agreeing on anything...."the bigger the group, the more the confusion"

- short on money supply...."they never have the money to carry a plan through"

- whites not contributing...."whites won't contribute now because their money will go to minorities"

5. Would minority community involvement prove to be a waste of time for minorities themselves?

6. Is minority community involvement a minority demand even within the minority community?

- two workers in the family...."they can't afford to be involved"

- one parent households...."the dad is never at home"

- fear...."most of them did not finish school and they are afraid of the teachers/administrators, they won't come"

- trust...."whites won't change, everything will remain the same, I don't care what they say."

- apathy...."things are fine, why should I go up to the school?"

MECHANISMS FOR INVOLVEMENT

It is obvious that community involvement in the schools is a "controversial issue" in the field of American education and American ethnic/minority relations. Therefore, in preparing this presentation I thought it would be helpful to develop an outline of the various mechanisms for "citizen participation" and influence in the schools rather than to pass judgement on any of them.

There are several reasons for this approach:

1. I am committed to increased community participation in the educational decision-making process.
2. I am committed to any kind of participation.
3. I question whether the concepts of centralization and decentralization are necessarily in conflict. Indeed, several studies have suggested that the real issue is how much power to share over such functions as curriculum, personnel, and budgeting, not which functions to give the community.

In reviewing community involvement programs in many school districts throughout the state of Illinois I find that there are four major areas that parents are interested in and want to participate in decisions made regarding those areas:

1. Overall student achievement: parental influence
2. Development of student self-concept and classroom management procedures
3. Community-school relations
4. Curriculum development

With these four areas in mind schools and school systems should develop the following plan:

1. Leadership preparation:

   No program will work without leadership support. Spend some time (half or full-day workshop) understanding the who-what-when-where-and why of the community involvement program. The Board of Education and administration should spend time together and away from the "system" to deliberate. (I can't help remembering that in almost all situations where desegregation failed -- the reason was traced to non-committal or non-support of leadership.)

2. Total Staff Preparation:

   Teachers and support staff members need help. At sometime or another these groups must have time to quietly sit down and discuss their own feelings about community involvement and understand exactly what to expect from the program. This is especially true in communities where minorities are involved.

3. Community Member Preparation:

Develop good informal relationships with key community members. Know your key contact people on first name basis. Spend some time cultivating the relationships. Be committed financially to community involvement in your schools. Once the informal contact is established--involve those key contacts in the formal situations. In other words, surround yourself with friends; the enemy will take care of himself.

The second step to this component is internal relations. The school staff should be the first step in any community relations/community involvement program. By maintaining good internal relations you decrease the possibility of turning a friend who does not know you into an enemy who thinks he knows you.

4. Know the Educational System's "Self".

5. Keep the Community Informed:

Develop a good two-way communications process. Show the educational system "self" freely and honestly.

6. Listen, Listen, Listen

7. Control the Emotion of the District

By this I mean try not to become annoyed at suggestions from involved community members that are not in agreement with those views of the district. Do not allow individuals to set the emotional tone of the district.

8. Communicate in Terms Appropriate to the Circumstances:

Don't be a stuffed shirt ready to show your educated vocabulary to all who will listen - make sure you are always understood. Ask if you were understood.

9. Follow-Up:

Always state your final decision and indicate which components of your decision were influenced by community involvement. Also state which recommendations by the community you did not use and why you did not use them.

Listed below are a number of ways that concerned citizens can participate in, or significantly influence school governments:

1. Out-of-school volunteer tutorial programs
2. Church sponsored "after-school" children's programs
3. Business organizations combined to facilitate the educational process (BOCFEP) (Ohio Bell telefriend program)
4. V I P (Vocational Information Programs)
5. Glenville Area Volunteers Inc.
   - nursery school
   - day care
   - blind student
   - gifted student, etc.
6. SUITS - Students United In Team Sports (Prairie-Hills School District)
7. Community Survey Volunteers (Prairie-Hills School District)
   - needs assessments
   - census
   - bond passage
8. Exercising Advisory Power
9. Teacher Aides
10. Joint School-Community ventures
    - interpersonal relations
11. Exercising delegated substantive authority
    - promote economic development of schools
    - expanding tax base
    - handling complaints, grievances and emergencies

12. Developing new systems of conflict resolutions

    - arbitrator
    - teacher transfer plans
    - multi-ethnic education planning

13. Direct Funding of not-for-profit groups to develop educational support services

    - Title IV
    - Title VII

    Park Forest, Illinois

    - Community Education Harvey, Illinois

14. Developing a system of voluntary consensus standards

    - the citizens coalition on desegregation
    - parent leadership training
    - school-community improvement programs
    - school-community relations councils

15. Adult Education programs (community education)

16. Community Professor programs

    - in the homes
    - in libraries
    - in local school

17. Extension and degree programs on military installations

18. Operation Bootstrap

19. Senior Citizen Nights (days)

    - games
    - plays
    - concerts

20. Open Houses and Orientation (Prairie-Hills School District)

    - real estate
    - civic

21. The "Roving Reading Lab" (alumni)
    - parents driving mobile library
22. Early Bird Breakfast program for community members (alumni)
    - working moms' and dads'
    - business community
    - real estate agents
23. Recreational Activity Sponsoring (alumni)
    - community leagues
    - little olympics
    - free instruction (clinics)
    - scholarship counseling

If public educational systems are to remain viable institutions, creative and vigorous attention must be given to <u>involving</u> the community in the <u>total</u> schooling process. By doing so you will find that:

1. Instruction will improve by permitting more individual help to students.
2. Curriculum will be enriched by adding the experiences of the total community to the knowledge of the educational system.
3. School/Community relations will improve by bringing more community adults from the community to show relevance of education.
4. The "Generation Gap" will close by providing more opportunity for children and adults to exchange ideas -- a two-way fringe benefit. Community involvement will help the student, the teacher, the school system, and the community.